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ABSTRACT

The Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education (University of Northern Iowa) focuses efforts on improving early childhood education (birth through 8 years) in Iowa by supporting educational efforts that emphasize children's interests, experimentation, and cooperation. In recent years, educational reform initiatives have targeted programs for 4-year-olds and younger elementary-aged children. The Regents' Center initiated a comprehensive needs assessment study of early education in Iowa in 1994. Surveys focused on program characteristics such as enrollment, instructional arrangements, staffing, teacher qualifications, parent participation, and other issues relating to program implementation. This report presents findings from Phase One, and consists of survey results from districts, elementary schools, elementary school principals, and teachers in 4-year-old, kindergarten, and first-grade programs. Preliminary findings of the surveys indicate that Iowa educators are receptive to the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices. Preliminary recommendations focus on further training in implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, and the need for state and local policies to support implementation of developmentally appropriate practices. (Author/SD)

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IOWA EARLY EDUCATION: THE STATE-OF-THE-STATE STUDY

APRIL 1995

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THE REGENTS' CENTER FOR EARLY DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
CEDAR FALLS, IOWA

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IOWA EARLY EDUCATION: THE STATE-OF-THE-STATE STUDY

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THE REGENTS' CENTER FOR
EARLY DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
CEDAR FALLS, IOWA

The Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education

Dr. Rheta DeVries, Director

Established in 1988, the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education focuses efforts on improving early childhood education (birth through eight years) in Iowa and beyond. Recognizing that children construct knowledge, intelligence, personality and morality through active experimentation with physical and social environments, the Center supports educational efforts that emphasize children's interests, experimentation, and cooperation. Through its activities, the Regents' Center aims to accomplish the following:

- Develop research-based programs and curriculum materials that respect the unique developmental needs of young children and their families;
- Promote applied and interdisciplinary research in education;
- Disseminate information about developmentally appropriate early education to educators, parents, and the public at state, national, and international levels through workshops, conferences, and publications;
- Assist in developing early education programs for at-risk children and their families;
- Inform policy-makers about the developmental and educational needs of young children and their families;
- Develop a model program for educating preservice and inservice teachers in developmentally appropriate education;
- Promote interinstitutional collaboration among the three Regents' universities, other educational agencies, and government agencies.

For more information concerning the activities of the Regents' Center, or a list of publications and videos available, contact:

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IOWA EARLY EDUCATION: THE STATE OF THE STATE STUDY

Iowa is committed to quality early childhood education. The importance of early education is evidenced through the state's investment in comprehensive early childhood programming, including child educational, health, medical and dental services, and parental education support services. Currently Iowa has a higher than average rate of serving preschool children from low income families.

In recent years educational reform initiatives have targeted programs for four-year-olds and younger elementary - aged children. To assist in meeting the need for increased high quality early education in Iowa, the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education initiated a state-of-the-state study of early education in 1994. Since limited data on early education programs was available, a comprehensive picture of current early educational programs and practices was needed . The state-of-the-state study will provide a needs assessment for early education in Iowa. The purpose of this report is to present preliminary findings from Phase One of the state-of-the-state study of early education in Iowa. A full technical report will be available from the Regent's Center for Early Developmental Education in fall 1995.

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

The initial goal of the study was to ascertain how early education programs are being implemented in public and nonpublic schools across the state. The first phase of the state-of-the-state study in early education surveyed districts, elementary schools, elementary principals, and teachers in four-year-old, kindergarten, and first grade programs. Each of the four surveys focused on program characteristics such as enrollment, instructional arrangements, staffing, teacher qualifications, parent participation, and other general issues relating to program implementation. Surveys were mailed to all superintendents, elementary schools, and elementary principals in Iowa. Elementary principals were requested to distribute the early childhood teacher survey to all teachers of four-year-olds, kindergarten, and first grade in their building, approximately 4500 teachers. Table 1 provides the numbers and percentages of surveys returned.

TABLE 1
SURVEY RESPONSE RATE

SURVEY	NUMBER MAILED	RETURN RATE
DISTRICT	397	168 (42.0%)
PRINCIPAL	1000	463 (46.3%)
SCHOOL	1010	335 (33.2%)
*TEACHER	4452	1691 (38.0%)

*Breakdown by teaching level is as follows:

Teachers of four-year-old programs = 162
Kindergarten = 702
First grade = 750
Mixed-age Classrooms = 51
Other = 26

WHAT ARE "DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES"?

"More than any other level of schooling, the early years benefit from an extensive body of research on best practices which have been synthesized by leaders in the field into a relatively coherent, methodological framework."

The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland, 1993

The benefits of high quality early education programs have been well documented. Although early education is important for all children, research suggests that it is particularly important for children from families at-risk. Early schooling experiences are critical for the future success of all children and in particular the at-risk children that they serve. Developmentally appropriate practices provide the framework for high quality early education programs.

Developmentally appropriate practices were formulated for children birth through age 8 in response to the widespread need for better ways of educating young children. This framework draws upon the base of knowledge about child development to suggest effective strategies for working with young children. Developmentally appropriate education is individually, culturally, and age appropriate. A developmentally appropriate program recognizes that:

- Children actively construct their own knowledge;
- The physical and interpersonal environment supports the program's learning goals;
- Children learn best through activities which engage their interest;
- Language develops best in a social context as children use language to express needs, insights, and excitement, and to solve problems through interaction with adults and peers;
- Inclusive programs expand opportunities for all children;
- Honoring children's cultural backgrounds helps them maintain and build self-respect and honor the culture of others;
- Appropriate assessment strengthens learning and teaching;
- Children benefit when parents and others from the community are involved with the program.

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE STUDY?

HOW FAMILIAR ARE IOWA EDUCATORS WITH DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES ?

- Iowa educators are receptive to developmentally appropriate practices. As one principal shared, "I think the push for a more developmental approach for early childhood is the way to go. We must make changes early in a child's life."
- On the whole, teachers felt that their schools' policies supported the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom. About 58 percent reported that their schools' policies were very supportive of the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices and 39 percent reported that they felt somewhat supported by their schools' policies in this area.

- Approximately 90 percent of district level administrators and elementary principals identified themselves as being familiar with the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

- Classroom teachers (83 %) were also familiar with the NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices. About 23 percent of the teachers belong to the Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children or NAEYC.

- Responses on the school survey indicated that 75 percent of the four-year-old programs, 65 percent of kindergarten programs, and 46 percent of first-grade programs identified developmentally appropriate practices as a framework for their program.

- Schools identified 18 percent of the following early education programs as being accredited by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs: four-year-olds (10 percent), kindergarten (4 percent), and first grade (4 percent).

- District level administrators, elementary principals, and early education teachers were also familiar with *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland*. About 80 percent of district level administrators and elementary principals were familiar with this new early education curriculum guide based on developmentally appropriate practices developed by the Iowa and Nebraska Departments of Education.

- Over 83 percent of the teachers who responded to the teacher survey were aware of *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland*. About 20 percent of the teachers reported implementing this curriculum in their classrooms.

ARE IOWA EDUCATORS' BELIEFS CONSISTENT WITH DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES?

- When questioned regarding their personal beliefs about a developmentally appropriate curriculum that emphasizes child-initiated activities, almost 90 percent of the principals and teachers strongly supported implementation of such a curriculum in programs for children in four-year-old and kindergarten programs. Slightly more than 70 percent of the principals and about 60 percent of the teachers believed that such a curriculum should continue in first-grade programs.

- Principals (82%) did not believe that academic instruction in the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic is appropriate in programs for four-year-olds. Around 53 percent of the principals reported that such instruction should occur in kindergarten programs and about 90 percent reported that such instruction should be part of first grade.

- Generally, teachers agreed with principals' beliefs regarding academic instruction in reading, writing, and math.

DO IOWA DISTRICT POLICIES SUPPORT DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES IN EARLY EDUCATION?

- District policy advocating the implementation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum that emphasizes child-initiated activities (such as pretend play, art, block building, sand and water) and includes a whole language approach to literacy was reported by 61 percent of the district administrators for four-year olds' classrooms, in contrast to 90 percent for kindergarten classrooms and 63 percent for first grade classrooms.

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- District policies did not advocate academic instruction in the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic for four-year-olds. Approximately 70 percent of the districts were reported to advocate such instruction in kindergarten. Instruction in the basics of reading , writing , and arithmetic in first grade was considered policy across all the districts that responded.

- Districts continued to practice retention in early education programs. During the 1993-94 school year, less than 1 percent of the schools retained four-year-old children; almost 33 percent of the schools retained children in kindergarten; and about 25 percent of the schools retained children in first grade.

DO IOWA CLASSROOMS REFLECT DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES?

- Learning centers are typically included as a part of the regular daily schedule. However, children's time in learning centers is limited, with 79 percent of the teachers reporting that children spent no more than one hour a day in the centers.

- Almost three-quarters of the teachers reported that academic content is taught in an integrated fashion, with some time also set aside for isolated subjects.

- Child choice in decisions about what will be studied is allowed by half of the teachers.

- Although 51 percent of the teachers have instructional aides in their classrooms, only 17 percent remain in the classroom for the entire session.

- About 37 percent of the schools provided a separate playground for children in early education programs.

HOW ARE STUDENTS ASSESSED IN IOWA'S EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

- Almost two thirds of the districts that responded were using portfolios to assess student performance; however, about 50 percent of the teachers reported that developmentally inappropriate assessment in the form of standardized achievement tests were used to assess student performance.

- Teachers reported that developmentally appropriate assessments were the most widely used sources of information regarding children's performance, including examples of students' work (92%) , portfolios (70%), and anecdotal records (64%).

- Child self-assessment as an additional source of information regarding student performance was reported by 27 percent of the classroom teachers.

WHAT ARE IOWA'S EARLY EDUCATION STAFF QUALIFICATIONS?

- The principals who responded to the surveys were experienced educators with 88 percent having a minimum of six years of teaching and 65 percent reporting 11 or more years of total teaching experience.

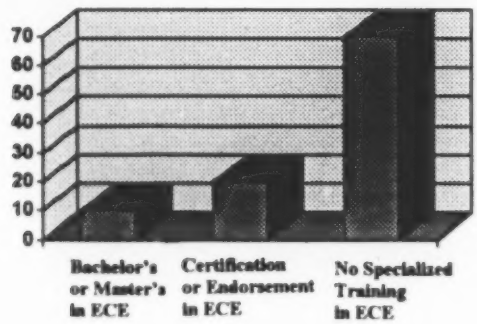
- Of the principals who returned the principal survey, 34 percent had taught in early education programs.

- Almost 75 percent of the principals had master's degrees in education.

- Teachers were also experienced educators, with 83 percent having 6 or more years of experience and 63 percent reporting 11 or more years of total teaching experiences.

- About 52 percent of the teachers reported 11 or more years of teaching experience in four-year-old, kindergarten, or first-grade classrooms.

- Only 10 percent of the teachers had bachelor's or master's degrees in early childhood. In addition, 20 percent had bachelor's degrees in elementary education with certification or endorsement in early childhood education. However, 70 percent had no specialized training in early education.



- Teachers requested additional training in the following areas:
  - Using learning centers in the classroom (43%)
  - Child-centered activities (39%)
  - Assessment techniques (37%)
  - *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland (35%)*
  - Implementing developmentally appropriate practices (31%)

ARE IOWA'S SCHOOLS COORDINATING WITH OTHERS TO PROVIDE EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND SERVICES?

- Funding for four-year-old programs was provided by the following sources (more than one source may have been used): tuition (47%), state funding (32%), district funding (32 %), federal programs other than Head Start (18%), Head Start (8%), and non-district local funding (6%).

- Only 29 percent of the schools made arrangements to provide full-day services for students in half-day programs. Full day services were provided through coordination with off-site day care options (5%), on-site day care (14%) , collaboration with Chapter I programs (6 %), and collaboration with Head Start programs (4 %).

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND EARLY EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

- Teachers reported that parent-teacher conferences (95%), telephone calls (88%), and report cards (83%) were the most widely used methods to inform parents of educational and developmental progress of their children.

- Home visits were not widely used to share information with parents.

- Parents primarily participated in the classroom by accompanying the class on field trips (55%).

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The national call for developmentally appropriate practices stems from the growing recognition that schools need to be responsive to the unique needs of the young children served in four-year-old, kindergarten, and first-grade programs. Knowledge of how these younger children develop is essential in designing programs. The preliminary results of the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education needs assessment study indicate that Iowa educators are receptive to the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices. Most district administrators and elementary principals are aware of the national guidelines regarding developmentally appropriate practices and *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland*. Familiarity with developmentally appropriate practices is also reflected through teacher verification that, on the whole, elementary school policies support the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices.

While Iowa educators are moving toward the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, further growth is needed. Early education staff require further training in the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices. Although Iowa early education teachers are experienced veterans in teaching, developmentally appropriate practice is a new direction for many programs. Classroom teachers identified the need for staff development in the areas of active learning through learning centers, child-centered activities, *The Primary Program*, and specifically implementing developmentally appropriate practices. Full implementation of developmentally appropriate practices cannot be accomplished without considerable support for staff development.

State and district policies must also support the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices. Care must be taken that curriculum does not get "pushed down" to early education programs. State and district policies must be totally aligned to reflect developmentally appropriate practices at all levels of early education. To this end the following preliminary recommendations are made:

- Increase provision of staff development to administrators and teaching staff in developmentally appropriate practices at both the inservice and preservice levels.
- Continue provision of staff development to administrators and teaching staff in the implementation of *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland.*
- Recognize and accept developmentally appropriate early education environments in public and nonpublic schools.
- Identify programs that are demonstrating exemplary developmentally appropriate practices to provide mentor networks and observation sites for developing programs.
- Develop a statewide system of staff development.

In order to address Iowa's needs identified in this study, the Regents' Center for Early Developmental Education will:

- Provide a more detailed full technical report of the final results of the Iowa State-of-the-State Early Education Study.
- Conduct a more comprehensive study of selected early education programs across the state.
- Develop a statewide training network to assist school districts in achieving full implementation of developmentally appropriate practices.